

Mike Fink - Doc1

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Mike, if this is not acceptable or if you need anything else, please let me know. Have a good day!

Theresa Rentko
Child/Forensic Interview Specialist
Lehigh County

I have been the Child/Forensic Interview Specialist for the Child Advocacy Center of Lehigh County for the past 4 1/2 years. Prior to this, I was the Special Victims Unit Child Abuse Investigator for the Lehigh County District Attorney's Office, for 15 + years, doing the investigations, and when necessary, arrests and court. Prior to that, I was a Children and Youth caseworker for 15 years, working with ongoing abuse cases and doing investigations. I continue to do training for several agencies, as well as attend any available training that pertains to this specialty.

In the "old days", prior to CAC's, it was very difficult to communicate with other agencies working the same case you had. Agencies didn't return phone calls to one another. They didn't trust each other. There were turf issues. They didn't understand each other's mandates. No one wanted to give up the information they had. It resulted in many cases being handled separately or not at all. There was no central concept, that this was all about the child.

In Jaycee Dugard's book, A STOLEN LIFE, she states that we live in a world where we rarely speak out and, when someone does, often nobody is there to listen. This is so true. We need to create a safe place for children to speak out about what has happened to them; a child friendly place where they can feel comfortable telling someone in detail about whatever terrible thing that has happened to them. The CAC creates a place where children can not only speak to someone who will listen, but can do it safely, without family or perpetrators being able to hear what they say. The police, OCYS, and other members of the multi-disciplinary team can observe this forensic interview which will save the child from multiple interviews. Medical exams and services can be done at the center or arranged quickly. A family advocate can help the family with other services as needed.

The benefits of a CAC model is consistent and fast follow-up to abuse reports, improved flow of information between agencies, effective medical services and Mental Health referrals, reduced trauma to children, and a child appropriate/friendly facility, resulting in increased successful prosecutions.

A forensic interview is a structured conversation with a child that is designed to elicit accurate accounts of events. The goal is either to corroborate or refute allegations. The objective is to discover the truth, not to prove or disprove abuse. Part of our protocol addresses how this is to be done. The forensic interviewer is always alone in a room with the child. In that room are only two chairs and a glass table. There is a small camera on the wall. We use the I-record system to record everything from the time the child enters the room until they leave. The system also allows the team to observe the entire interview from another room on a TV screen.

At some point during the interview, the interviewer goes to the team to discuss any concerns or other information they need. All questioning must be done so as not to taint what the child says. Taint is when the interviewing techniques of interested adults are so unduly suggestive and/or coercive that the memory of the child is affected, rendering that child incompetent to testify. These recorded interviews are often shown to defense attorneys and/or in court proceedings. If it appears that a child's testimony has been tainted, the whole case will be dismissed. Interviews done correctly have saved many children from having to testify in the courtroom. Following the interview a copy is given to the police detective. One copy is always kept by the DA's Office.

Questions must be asked in a sensitive and legally defensible manner. We cannot ask questions that suggest what happened. Emotions must be controlled. We must LISTEN carefully to what is and is not being said. There is no interrogation. Can you imagine being a child sitting with a stranger and having to tell them in detail about sexual abuse? A child needs to be able to trust the person talking with them and to be comfortable in that environment. We offer that with the CAC model. Interviews are not conducted in police stations, homes, or hospitals, except in the most unusual situations. To have a child friendly building and a team of professionals is a long way from where we were in the "old days". We are co-located and quickly get involved as a team. We have Multidisciplinary Team Meetings. We brainstorm. We strategize. Each person has a role in the case. We are so much more effective in protecting our children. We must continue to improve and move forward. We need a safe place for the children to be heard and continued training for all those who choose to do this work.